

What is Claimed is:

1. An apparatus for implementing an automated auction process, the apparatus comprising:
 - a plurality of workstations, each of the workstations comprising:
 - a workstation storage device;
 - a workstation processor connected to the workstation storage device, the workstation storage device storing a workstation program for controlling the workstation processor; and
 - the workstation processor operative with the workstation program to receive bids on at least one item, and to display an animated auctioneer that announces a current bid; and
 - a server operative to communicate with the plurality of workstations and receive the bids on the at least one item, the server comprising:
 - a server storage device;
 - a server processor connected to the server storage device, the server storage device storing a server program for controlling the server processor; and
 - the server processor operative with the server program to determine the current bid based on the received bids and to stop accepting subsequent bids after a pre-determined time period has elapsed following the determination of the current bid.
2. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the workstation processor of at least one of the plurality of workstations is adapted to receive product information on the at least one item and to display the product information.

3. The apparatus of claim 2 wherein the product information comprises a description of the at least one item.

4. The apparatus of claim 2 wherein the product information comprises a photograph of the at least one item.

5. The apparatus of claim 2 wherein the product information comprises a video presentation of the at least one item.

6. The apparatus of claim 2 wherein the product information comprises the number of units available for sale of the at least one item.

7. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the workstation processor of at least one of the plurality of workstations is adapted to receive sale information on the at least one item.

8. The apparatus of claim 7 wherein the sale information comprises a reserve price for the at least one item.

9. The apparatus of claim 7 wherein the sale information comprises at least one of the group of parameters consisting of a preferred auction duration and a preferred auction commencement time.

10. The apparatus of claim 7 wherein the sale information comprises a preferred method of payment.

11. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the server processor is adapted to conduct a search for an item related to the at least one item and display search results on the workstation display of at least one of the plurality of workstations.

12. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the server processor is adapted to conduct a search for an item related to items in which a user has demonstrated interest and display search results on the workstation display of at least one of the plurality of workstations.

13. The apparatus of claim 12 wherein the server processor is adapted to allow the user to enter an auction on the related item.

14. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the server processor is adapted to determine an auction commencement time and a minimum acceptable opening bid for the at least one item.

15. The apparatus of claim 14 wherein the pre-determined time period may be calculated based on at least one of the group of parameters consisting of the nature of the at least one item, the expected selling price of the at least one item, and the minimum acceptable opening bid.

16. The apparatus of claim 14 wherein the workstation processor of at least one of the plurality of workstations is adapted to display the auction commencement time and the minimum acceptable opening bid.

17. The apparatus of claim 16 wherein the animated auctioneer is adapted to announce the minimum acceptable opening bid at the auction commencement time.

18. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the server processor is adapted to select the animated auctioneer from a set of genre-based characters.

19. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the workstation processor of at least one of the plurality of workstations is operative with the workstation program to display an animated bid spotter that is adapted to solicit additional bids from a user.

20. The apparatus of claim 19 wherein the server processor is adapted to select the animated bid spotter from a set of genre-based characters.

21. The apparatus of claim 19 wherein the animated bid spotter is adapted to seek confirmation from the user for a bid placed by the user.

22. The apparatus of claim 21 wherein the animated bid spotter is adapted to announce the bid placed by the user to the user.

23. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the workstation processor of at least one of the plurality of workstations is operative with the workstation program to display a first animated auction attendant that is adapted to welcome a potential bidder to the auction process.

24. The apparatus of claim 23 wherein the server processor is adapted to select the first animated auction attendant from a set of genre-based characters.

25. The apparatus of claim 23 wherein the workstation processor of at least one of the plurality of workstations is operative with the workstation program to display a second animated auction attendant to a winning bidder.

26. The apparatus of claim 25 wherein the server processor is adapted to select the second animated auction attendant from a set of genre-based characters.

27. The apparatus of claim 25 wherein the second animated auction attendant is adapted to instruct the winning bidder to choose a method of payment for the at least one item.

28. The apparatus of claim 27 wherein the second animated auction attendant is adapted to ask the winning bidder to confirm the chosen method of payment.

29. The apparatus of claim 25 wherein the server storage device is adapted to store preferred payment and shipping information pertaining to the winning bidder, the second animated auction attendant being adapted to display and ask the winning bidder to confirm the preferred payment and shipping information.

30. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the bids received on the at least one item comprise advance bids.

31. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein at least one of the bids received on the at least one item comprises a Smart Bid.

32. The apparatus of claim 31 wherein the Smart Bid is calculated by the server processor to be higher than the sum of a minimum acceptable incremental bid and the current bid in order to insure that a bidder is given the opportunity to place a bid corresponding to the maximum amount the bidder is willing to place.

33. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the pre-determined time period may be updated based on at least one of the group of parameters consisting of the pre-determined time period, the current bid, and the number of received bids.

34. The apparatus of claim 19 wherein the pre-determined time period comprises a first pre-determined time period.

35. The apparatus of claim 34 wherein the animated auctioneer is adapted to make a first announcement after the first pre-determined time period.

36. The apparatus of claim 35 wherein the animated bid spotter is adapted to solicit additional bids from the user after the first announcement.

37. The apparatus of claim 36 wherein the animated auctioneer is adapted to make a second announcement after a second pre-determined time period, the second pre-determined time period being calculated after the first announcement based on the first pre-determined time period.

38. The apparatus of claim 37 wherein the animated auctioneer is adapted to make a third announcement after a third pre-determined time period, the third pre-determined time period being calculated after the second announcement based on the second pre-determined time period.

39. The apparatus of claim 37 wherein the second pre-determined time period is substantially equal to the first pre-determined time period.

40. The apparatus of claim 38 wherein the third pre-determined time period is substantially equal to the second pre-determined time period.

41. The apparatus of claim 35 wherein the first announcement comprises a "Last Chance to Bid" announcement.

42. The apparatus of claim 35 wherein the first announcement comprises a "Going Once" announcement.

43. The apparatus of claim 37 wherein the second announcement comprises a "Going Twice" announcement.

44. The apparatus of claim 37 wherein the second announcement comprises a "Sold" announcement.

45. The apparatus of claim 38 wherein the third announcement comprises a "Sold" announcement.

46. The apparatus of claim 1 wherein the server and the plurality of workstations are connected through the Internet.

47. A method for implementing an automated auction process, the method comprising:

- displaying an animated auctioneer on an interactive screen, the animated auctioneer announcing the start of the auction process;

- displaying product information relating to at least one item on an interactive screen;

- following a determination of a highest bid, setting a pre-determined time period after which no bids on the at least one item are accepted;

- receiving at least one bid on the at least one item;

- determining a current bid on the at least one item based on the at least one bid; and

- announcing the current bid on the at least one item through the animated auctioneer displayed on the interactive screen.

48. The method of claim 47 wherein the displaying product information relating to the at least one item comprises displaying a description of the at least one item.

49. The method of claim 47 wherein the displaying product information relating to the at least one item comprises displaying a photograph of the at least one item.

50. The method of claim 47 wherein the displaying product information relating to the at least one item comprises displaying a video presentation of the at least one item.

51. The method of claim 47 wherein the displaying product information relating to the at least one item comprises displaying the number of units available for sale of the at least one item.

52. The method of claim 47 further comprising receiving sale information on the at least one item prior to the displaying the animated auctioneer.

53. The method of claim 52 wherein the receiving sale information on the at least one item comprises receiving a reserve price for the at least one item.

54. The method of claim 52 wherein the receiving sale information on the at least one item comprises receiving at least one of the group of parameters consisting of a preferred auction duration and a preferred auction commencement time.

55. The method of claim 52 wherein the receiving sale information on the at least one item comprises receiving a preferred method of payment.

56. The method of claim 47 further comprising conducting a search for an item related to the at least one item and displaying search results relating to the search.

57. The method of claim 47 further comprising conducting a search for an item related to items in which a user has demonstrated interest and displaying search results relating to the search.

58. The method of claim 57 further comprising allowing the user to enter an auction on the related item.

59. The method of claim 47 further comprising setting an auction commencement time for the at least one item prior to the displaying the animated auctioneer.

60. The method of claim 47 further comprising setting a minimum acceptable opening bid for the at least one item prior to the displaying the animated auctioneer.

61. The method of claim 47 further comprising setting a minimum acceptable incremental bid for the at least one item.

62. The method of claim 60 wherein the animated auctioneer announcing the start of the auction process comprises the animated auctioneer announcing the minimum acceptable opening bid.

63. The method of claim 61 wherein the animated auctioneer announcing the start of the auction process comprises the animated auctioneer announcing the minimum acceptable incremental bid.

64. The method of claim 47 wherein the displaying an animated auctioneer on the interactive screen comprises selecting the animated auctioneer from a set of genre-based characters.

65. The method of claim 47 wherein the receiving at least one bid on the at least one item comprises receiving an advance bid on the at least one item.

66. The method of claim 47 wherein the receiving at least one bid on the at least one item comprises receiving a Smart Bid on the at least one item.

67. The method of claim 66 wherein the receiving the Smart Bid comprises calculating the at least one bid to be higher than the sum of a minimum acceptable incremental bid and the current bid in order to insure that a bidder is given the opportunity to place a bid corresponding to the maximum amount the bidder is willing to place.

68. The method of claim 61 wherein the receiving at least one bid on the at least one item comprises receiving a plurality of bids on the at least one item during the pre-determined time period.

69. The method of claim 68 wherein the determining a current bid on the at least one item comprises comparing each of the plurality of bids on the at least one item with the sum of the minimum acceptable incremental bid and a most recent current bid.

70. The method of claim 69 wherein the determining a current bid on the at least one item further comprises prioritizing the plurality of bids on the at least one item based on the time each of the plurality of bids is received.

71. The method of claim 70 wherein the determining a current bid on the at least one item further comprises determining an updated highest bid among the prioritized plurality of bids on the at least one item.

72. The method of claim 47 further comprising allowing a user who placed a bid on the at least one item to retract the bid the user placed during the pre-determined time period.

73. The method of claim 47 further comprising displaying an animated bid spotter on the interactive screen, the animated bid spotter soliciting additional bids on the at least one item from a user.

74. The method of claim 73 wherein the displaying an animated bid spotter on the interactive screen comprises selecting the animated bid spotter from a set of genre-based characters.

75. The method of claim 73 wherein the displaying an animated bid spotter on the interactive screen animated comprises displaying the animated bid spotter for seeking confirmation from the user for a bid placed by the user.

76. The method of claim 75 wherein the displaying an animated bid spotter for seeking confirmation from the user comprises displaying the animated bid spotter for announcing the bid to the user.

77. The method of claim 47 wherein the interactive screen is a first interactive screen, the method further comprising displaying a first animated auction attendant on a second interactive screen, the first animated auction attendant for welcoming a potential bidder to the automated auction process.

78. The method of claim 77 wherein the displaying a first animated auction attendant comprises selecting the first animated auction attendant from a set of genre-based characters.

79. The method of claim 77 further comprising displaying a second animated auction attendant on a third interactive screen to a winning bidder.

80. The method of claim 79 wherein the displaying a second animated auction attendant comprises selecting the second animated auction attendant from a set of genre-based characters.

81. The method of claim 79 wherein the displaying a second animated auction attendant comprises displaying a second animated auction attendant for instructing the winning bidder to choose a method of payment for the at least one item.

82. The method of claim 81 wherein the displaying a second animated auction attendant further comprises displaying the second animated auction attendant for asking the winning bidder to confirm the chosen method of payment for the at least one item.

83. The method of claim 79 further comprising storing a preferred method of payment pertaining to the winning bidder, the displaying a second animated auction attendant further comprises displaying the second animated auction attendant for asking the winning bidder to confirm the preferred method of payment for the at least one item.

84. The method of claim 60 wherein the setting a pre-determined time period comprises calculating the pre-determined time period based on at least one of the group of parameters consisting of the nature of the at least one item, the expected selling price of the at least one item, and the minimum acceptable opening bid.

85. The method of claim 68 wherein the setting a pre-determined time period comprises updating the pre-determined time period based on at least one of the group of parameters consisting of the pre-determined time period, the current bid, and the number of the plurality of bids received on the at least one item.

86. The method of claim 73 wherein the setting a pre-determined time period comprises setting a first pre-determined time period.

87. The method of claim 86 wherein the displaying an animated auctioneer comprises displaying the animated auctioneer for making a first announcement after the first pre-determined time period.

88. The method of claim 87 wherein the displaying an animated bid spotter comprises displaying the animated bid spotter for soliciting additional bids on the at least one item after the first announcement.

89. The method of claim 87 wherein the displaying an animated auctioneer further comprises displaying the animated auctioneer for making a second announcement after a second pre-determined time period, the second pre-determined time period being calculated after the first announcement based on the first pre-determined time period.

90. The method of claim 89 wherein the displaying an animated auctioneer further comprises displaying the animated auctioneer for making a third announcement after a third pre-determined time period, the third pre-determined time period being calculated after the second announcement based on the second pre-determined time period.

91. The method of claim 89 further comprising setting the second pre-determined time period to be substantially equal to the first pre-determined time period.

92. The method of claim 90 further comprising setting the third pre-determined time period to be substantially equal to the second pre-determined time period.

93. The method of claim 87 wherein the animated auctioneer making the first announcement comprises the animated auctioneer announcing "Last Chance to Bid".

94. The method of claim 87 wherein the animated auctioneer making a first announcement comprises the animated auctioneer announcing "Going Once".

95. The method of claim 89 wherein the animated auctioneer making a second announcement comprises the animated auctioneer announcing "Going Twice".

96. The method of claim 89 wherein the animated auctioneer making a second announcement comprises the animated auctioneer announcing "Sold".

97. The method of claim 90 wherein the animated auctioneer making a third announcement comprises the animated auctioneer announcing "Sold".

98. The method of claim 47 further comprising prompting a user intending to submit the at least one bid for a username and a password.

99. The method of claim 52 further comprising prompting a user intending to sell the at least one item for a username and a password prior to the receiving sale information on the at least one item.

100. The method of claim 47 further comprising implementing the automated auction process on the Internet.